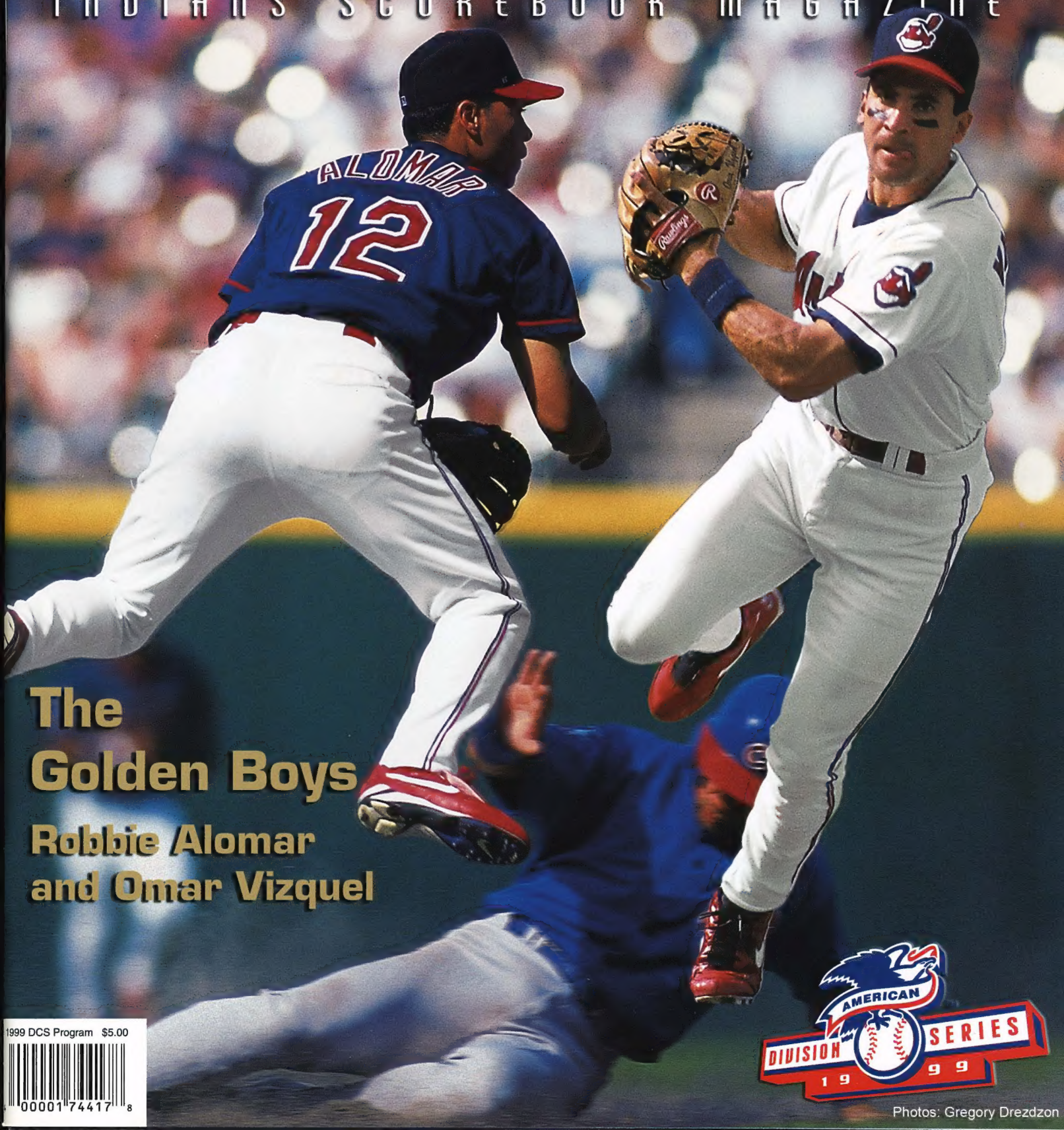


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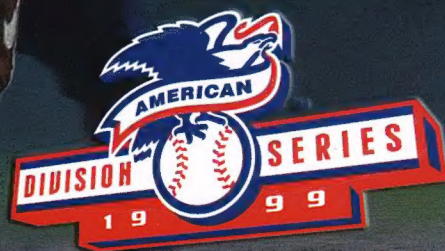
INDIANS SCOREBOOK MAGAZINE



The Golden Boys

Robbie Alomar
and Omar Vizquel

1999 DCS Program \$5.00



Photos: Gregory Drezdson



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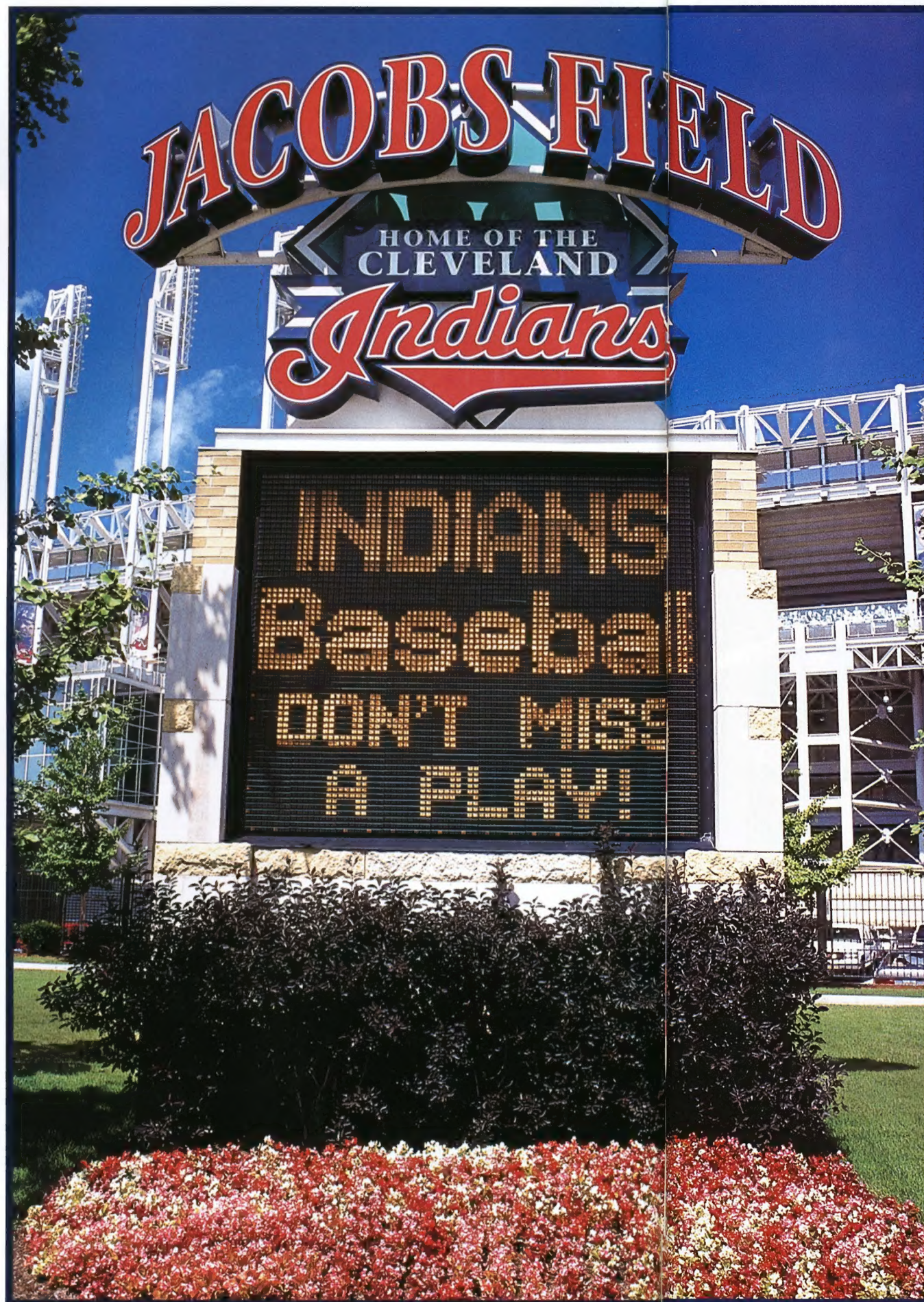
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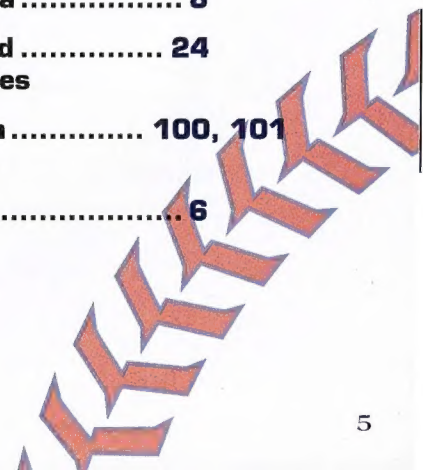
by Russell Schneider

Hall-of-Famer **Frank Robinson** became the player-manager of the Cleveland Indians on October 3, 1974. At the time, he was an aging, but still capable and respected player. He was also the first African American to manage a Major League team. The Indians final regular-season game of this century marked the 25th anniversary of this milestone.

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THE GOLDEN BOYS

by Bill Needle

One was "The Golden Child," playing at seven against players in their teens — and in his teens against established professionals. He seemed to have grown up in a Major League clubhouse, watching closely as his father forged a 15-year big league career with seven different clubs. His bats, gloves, and shoes were hand-me-downs from **Willie Randolph**, **Bert Campanaris** and, yes, **Mike Hargrove**. He was destined, almost from birth, to play the game of baseball — at its highest level.

The other was nicknamed "The Earthquake" for the constant pandemonium that followed him,

a child who lived on a highwire, a Venezuelan Tasmanian Devil to whom life was a giant envelope with edges to be pushed, and often ripped open, almost daily. His playgrounds were, both literally and figuratively, thousands of miles from Yankee Stadium — uneven, rocky, glass-strewn patches of dust in the teeming metropolis of Caracas.

In 1999, after several seasons of speculation that it might occur, **Roberto Alomar** and **Omar Vizquel** finally met at second base wearing Indians uniforms — and neither the game nor the fortunes of Tribe baseball will ever be the same.

As adults, they remain somewhat as they were as boys. Vizquel, once called "The Earthquake," is an outgoing combination of artist, designer, salsa entrepreneur, and percussionist who just happens to have the highest fielding percentage of any shortstop in baseball history.

Alomar is more reserved, equally approachable — if less ebullient — content to let his first season with the Indians speak for him. He knows the best all-around campaign of his 11-year career will make him a contender for the American League's *Most Valuable Player Award*.

"I don't like to talk about myself and I'm not a rah-rah guy," Alomar says. "I'm going to play hard, but I'm not going to be the kind of guy who's going to be yelling all the time to my teammates."

Even if Alomar DID choose to be vocal, chances are his bat and glove would still be speaking far more loudly than his words. In fact, for any of Alomar's words to be heard over the noise of his bat and glove in 1999, he'd have to shout at the top of his voice — which the soft-spoken 31-year-old simply won't do.

"I knew from watching him play for other teams that Robbie was a great player," says Indians broadcaster **Dave Nelson**, himself a 10-year Major League second baseman. "But this year, to watch him every game, day-in and day-out, I just can't believe some of the things he does."



Photo: Gregory Drezdron

He's easily one of the greatest ever to play the position."

**— Tribe Broadcaster
Dave Nelson
on Robbie Alomar**

He's easily one of the greatest ever to play the position."

As effervescent as Alomar is mellow, Vizquel has no trouble characterizing himself as, "most of the time a happy guy. I like real bright colors, so that probably tells you a lot about my personality. I drive a bright car (a canary yellow Porsche) and I like bright clothes (ever see him in his yellow and purple suit?) and everything that is bright. I like life — and I like to enjoy it."

One can't ask Alomar and Vizquel how they do what they do. It's not that each doesn't know he's one of the best-ever at his position. It's just that, to them, they're simply playing the game they've played since childhood. Beethoven couldn't explain his genius, and the best analysis one gets from Vizquel is, "Guys on my team have asked me, 'How did you make that play?' I tell them, 'I don't know. You saw it. I didn't. You don't concentrate on trying to make a diving catch or making a barehanded play. You just concentrate on doing the routine plays and the other ones come natural.'" That said, it becomes the job of others to try to explain the phenomena who are The Golden Child and The Earthquake.

To one future Hall-of-Famer, Alomar's brilliance is as much mental as it is physical. "Many people don't realize how much knowledge Robbie has of the game," says Cal Ripken, who played with Alomar for three seasons between 1996-98. "He loves to talk about baseball. I always loved to talk with him about situations and positioning hitters

and things like that. He knows as much as anyone about how to play the game and he might have the best instincts for playing baseball of anyone I've ever seen."

To **Brian Graham**, the Indians infield coach, Vizquel and Alomar are blessed with every tool an infielder needs for greatness. "They're complete players from

a physical standpoint," Graham says. "They have the athleticism and the agility — and don't forget the instincts — the quickness, the good hands, of course, the intellect and aptitude. They're very prepared for each hitter in each game.

"They do all the little things right. Their feet are always in the right position to catch the ball, they

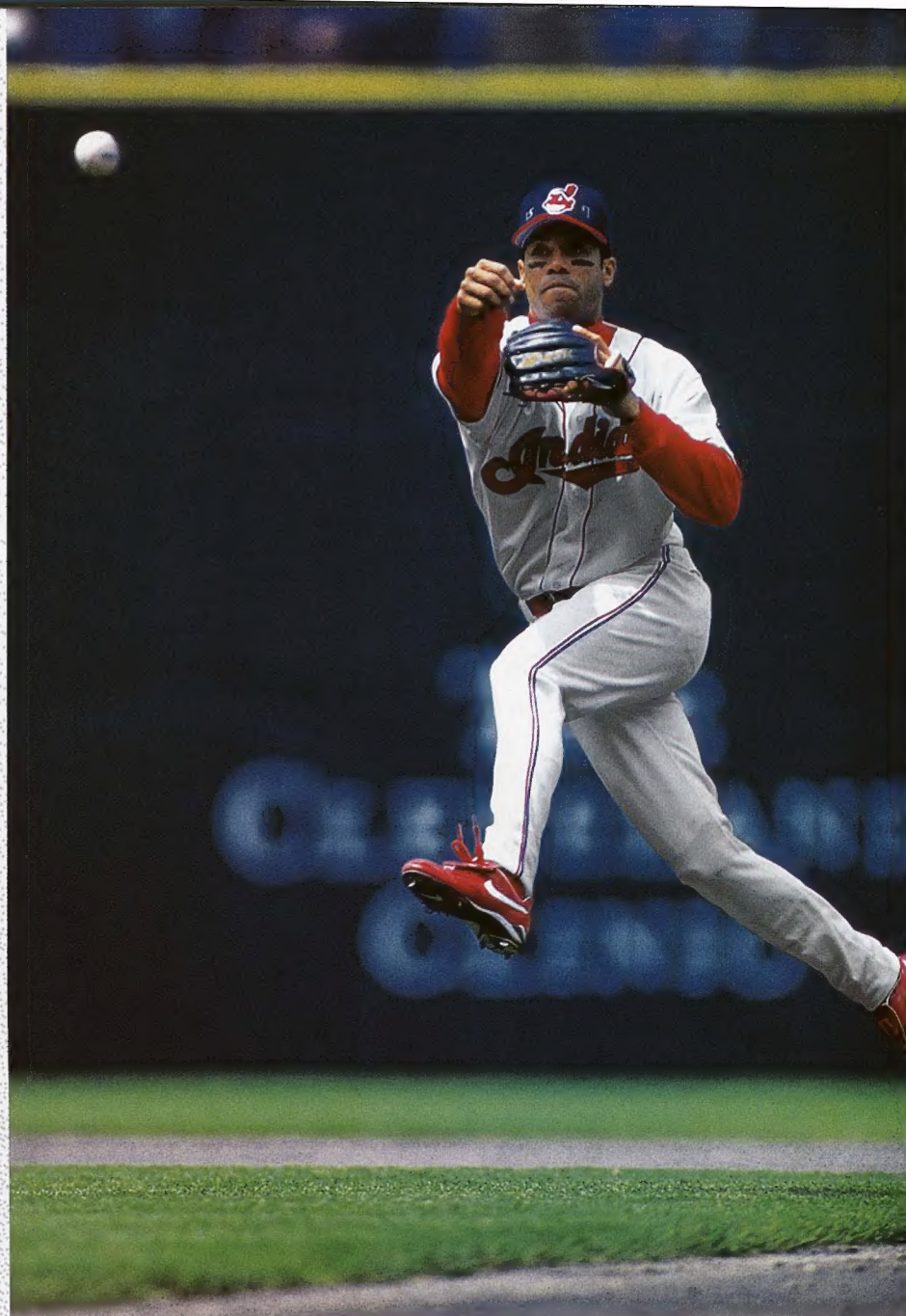


Photo: Gregory Drezdson

Vizquel (left) and Alomar (above) excite an audience with amazing "fielding feats." Complete players, they also ignite excitement at the plate — doing it all — bunts, well-placed hits, and home runs.

always know which direction to go with the ball when they catch it. They're complete players. When you look at the whole mental, physical, and fundamental sides of baseball, they are two guys who fulfill all three of those areas on an everyday basis."

Sluggo **Jim Thome** explains Vizquel's brilliant defense in unique and appropriate fashion: "I compare Omar's defense to **Ken Griffey's** offensive skills. It looks like he's not even trying. What Omar does takes a lot of confidence and a lot of talent."

"I want to hit .300 so people don't just say, 'He's a good defensive shortstop.' If I hit .300, people will say, 'He's a good shortstop.'"

— Omar Vizquel

Actually, Griffey and Thome, both hitting under .300 in early September, might want to take a lesson from Vizquel's 1999 *offensive* performance. With a .333 batting average as of Labor Day, Vizquel was hitting 36 points higher than his best single-season mark and 65 points higher than his career average.

With Seattle, from whom Vizquel was obtained in December of 1993, season averages of .220, .247, .230 and .255 led him to be occasionally referred to as "Omar the Outmaker."

"I think Seattle felt Omar was too expensive for a light-hitting shortstop," said Tribe GM **John Hart**. "So we were able to make the deal for him."

Since coming to Cleveland, Vizquel is hitting almost .290. The shortstop explains, "I want to hit .300 so people don't just say, 'He's a good defensive shortstop.' If I hit .300, people will say, 'He's a good shortstop.'"

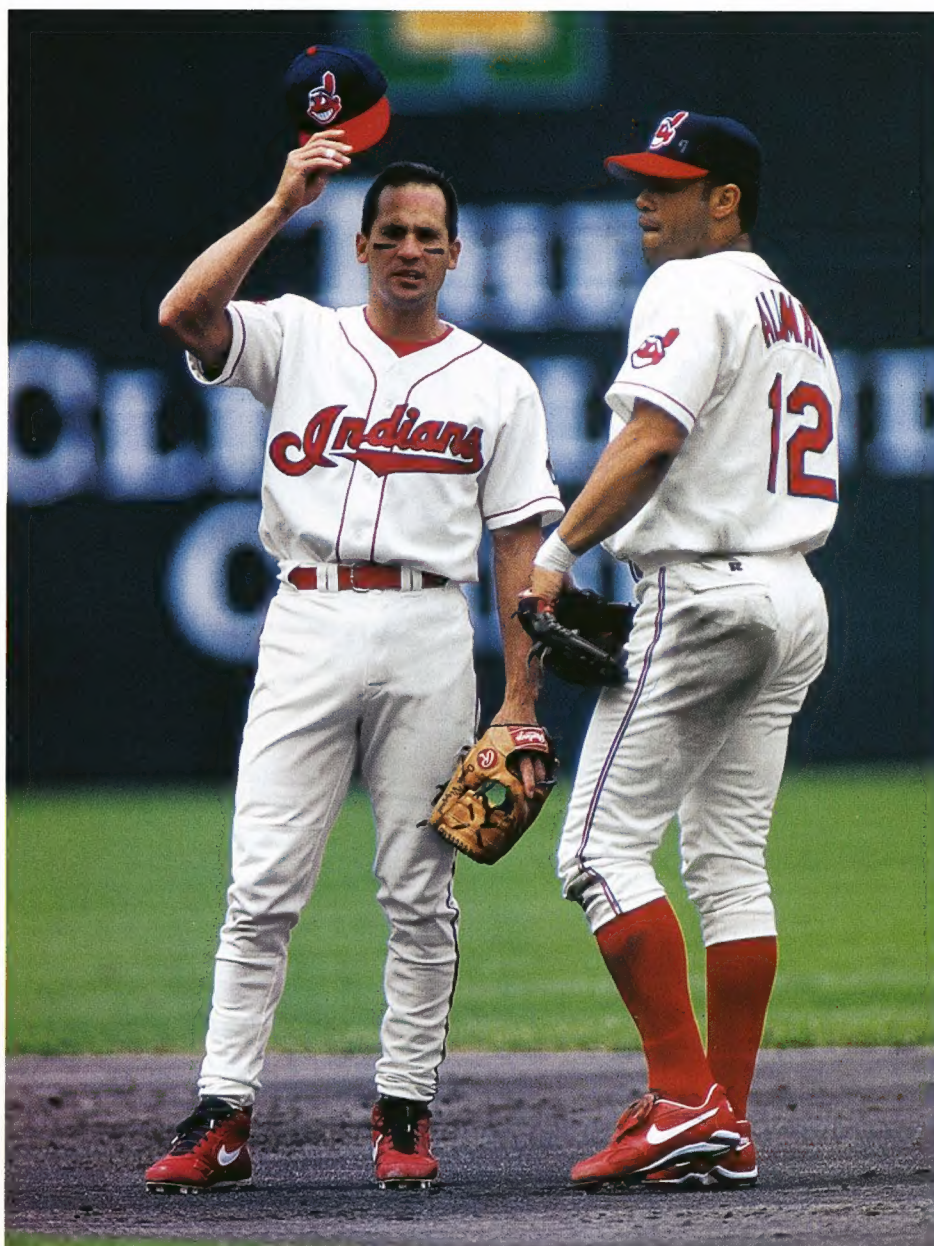


Photo: Gregory Drezdson

One explanation for the huge increase in offense comes from Tribe hitting instructor **Charlie Manuel**. "Over the years he's been here, he's learned to keep his stroke short and quick," Manuel says. "He stays strong in his weight shift and he's a lot stronger than you'd think for a little guy. He hasn't surprised me at all."

Another reason for the higher average might be that Vizquel no longer returns to Venezuela each winter to play in the 60-odd games that comprise a full season of winter baseball.

"It really got to be too much," he said. "After playing a full season in

the Major Leagues, playing at home was not a good idea. I would get really tired by July and have terrible months in August and September.

"When I stopped playing winter ball, I would hear people complain. They would say that because I'm in the big leagues making money, I don't have to play at home anymore."

To Alomar, "home" may very well seem to be a baseball field. Signed to a professional contract at the age of 17, Alomar played his first winter ball in Puerto Rico while still a high school student and older players, like Tribe bullpen coach

Luis Issac, remember Alomar doing homework before games in the clubhouse or dugout.

"That's true," says Alomar. "I still had to finish high school. But my dream — as long as I can remember — was to be a Major League ballplayer. So signing before I graduated was a way to get me started toward that dream."

"He'd hide in the back of the car when my dad went to his games just so he could always be at the ballpark."

— Tribe catcher Sandy Alomar on brother, Robbie

But don't get the idea that Alomar, despite his precocity, was born a Major League second baseman. As a kid, he was still a kid, prone to mischief like Vizquel the Earth-

quake ("I was an action kid," said Vizquel, "and I've got the stitches all over my body to prove it"). It's just that whatever mischief Alomar got into usually seemed to be baseball-related.

"Robbie must have been eight or nine," says Issac, "and I was playing on a team with his father in winter ball. Robbie always had this broomstick with him and he'd hit stones, or whatever, with it.

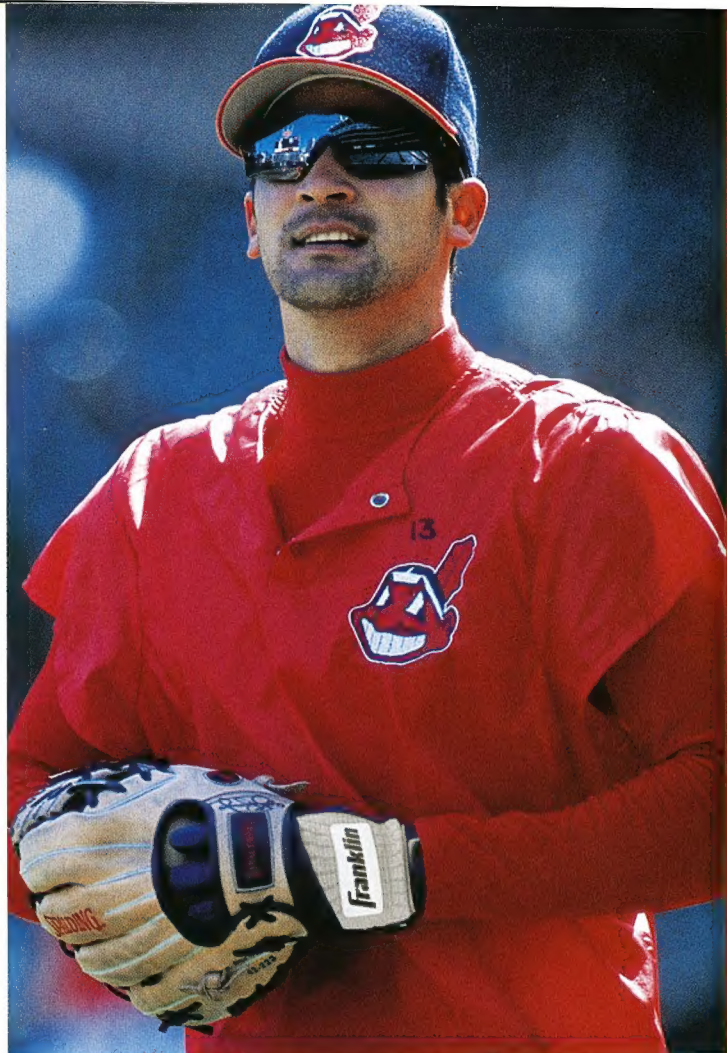
"One day, he was behind me and I wasn't looking, and he hit a stone on a line drive and it got me right in the face. I started bleeding and I got so mad I started chasing after him, and I was going to give him the spanking of his life.

"Robbie got scared and started running away. He jumped the outfield fence. But the game was going on at the time and there were about 13,000 people in the stands. He was going to run to his father.

"Some people caught him before he ever made it, though."

Perhaps the best observer of The Golden Child is Sandy Alomar, Jr., 20 months older than brother Roberto, and himself a Gold Glove winner and six-time All-Star.

"With Robbie, well, you could tell he was something special at an early age. With him, it was always baseball, baseball, baseball. Everybody knew he was going to be a big leaguer.



"I wasn't like him. I was into dirt bikes and cars and martial arts. I didn't take baseball seriously until I was a teenager. But Robbie, man, all he ever wanted was to play baseball.

"He'd hide in the back of the car when my dad went to his games just so he could always be at the ballpark. I only got half the baseball genes Robbie did."

Roberto Alomar is too modest to disclose whether he actually knew when he was seven years old that he would be a Major Leaguer as an adult, even if his brother and others did.

Vizquel, however, knows exactly when he realized he was good enough to play in the Majors. After years of practice with a dedicated father, after the alienation that came from being a 16-year-old rookie in Butte, Montana, not knowing the language or the



"The first time I knew I could make it was when I was about 20 . . . they invited me to big league training camp . . . I saw I could do everything everyone else did."

— Omar Vizquel

culture, and after being told that size — or a bazooka-like throwing arm — was necessary for admission to the Bigs, it came to Omar Vizquel on a spring day in Arizona that he was, in fact, good enough to play at baseball's highest level.

"The first time I knew I could make it was when I was about 20," Vizquel said. "I was playing in Double-A, but they invited me to big league training camp. When I was there, I saw I could do everything everyone else did. The only thing they could do was hit the ball farther."

The Earthquake and The Golden Child took radically different paths

to second base at Jacobs Field. Once they got there, it became clear their performance would be radically different from all who preceeded them, not just at Jacobs Field, but at any field on which the Indians have ever played. Never has the Tribe employed a second base combination with 13 Gold Gloves between them. Indians history aside, only once in baseball history has each member of a double-play combo hit better than the .330 of Vizquel and Alomar (projected through Labor Day) — 2B **Buddy Myer** hit .336 and SS **Cecil Travis** hit .335 for the 1938 Washington Senators.

And with all due respect to **Alan Trammell** and **Lou Whitaker**, **Nelson Fox** and **Luis Aparicio**, **Dick Groat** and **Bill Mazerowski**, **Dave Concepcion** and **Joe Morgan** or any of the magnificent keystone pairs who have thrilled fans since World War II, perhaps Alomar and Vizquel are the best, both statistically and stylistically.

Vizquel's trademark barehand fielding plays and Alomar's patented 40-foot backhand throws have even veteran Indians gushing with praise. "They're like Van Gogh and Picasso," said pitcher **Paul Assenmacher**.

"It's like putting Gretzky on the same line with Lemieux," said former Indian **Jeff Manto**.

In truth, it's like pairing the best

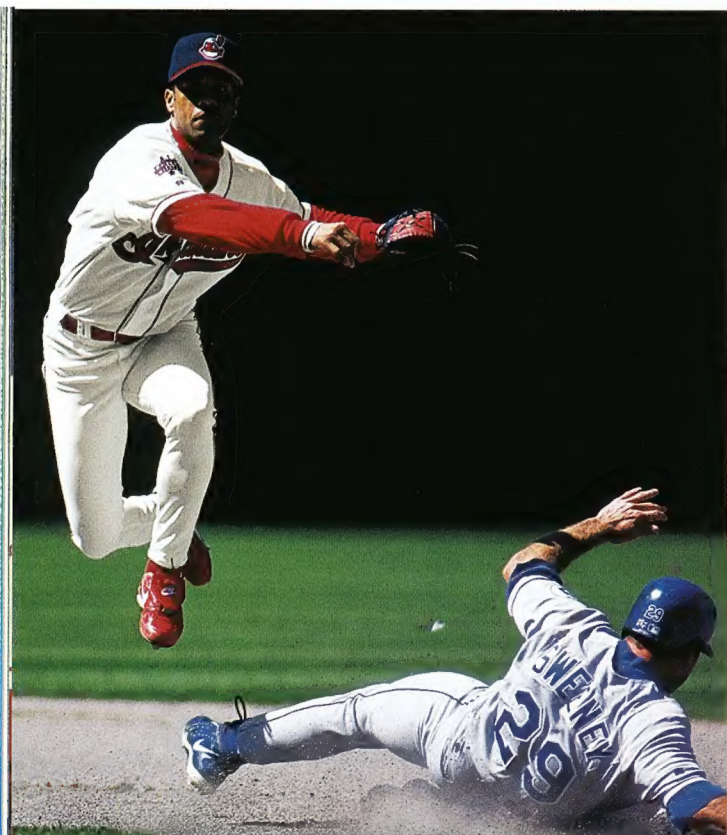


In addition to their fielding magic . . .

By Labor Day, Vizquel (above) was hitting 36 points above his best single-season BA and 65 points above his career BA. Meanwhile, Alomar (left) was quickly racking up runs scored and RBI.

fielding shortstop of all time with a future Hall-of-Fame second baseman. But Alomar stresses caution in dealing the superlatives. "I think Omar and I have the ability to be mentioned with those great second basemen and shortstops," he says. "But wait a while, we haven't even been together a full year yet."

But, several more years like 1999 could easily put Vizquel and Alomar at the top of the list of the best middle-infield pairs in history. Especially if a World Championship or two are tossed into the evaluation.



Photos: Gregory Drezdson







1999 Cleveland Indians

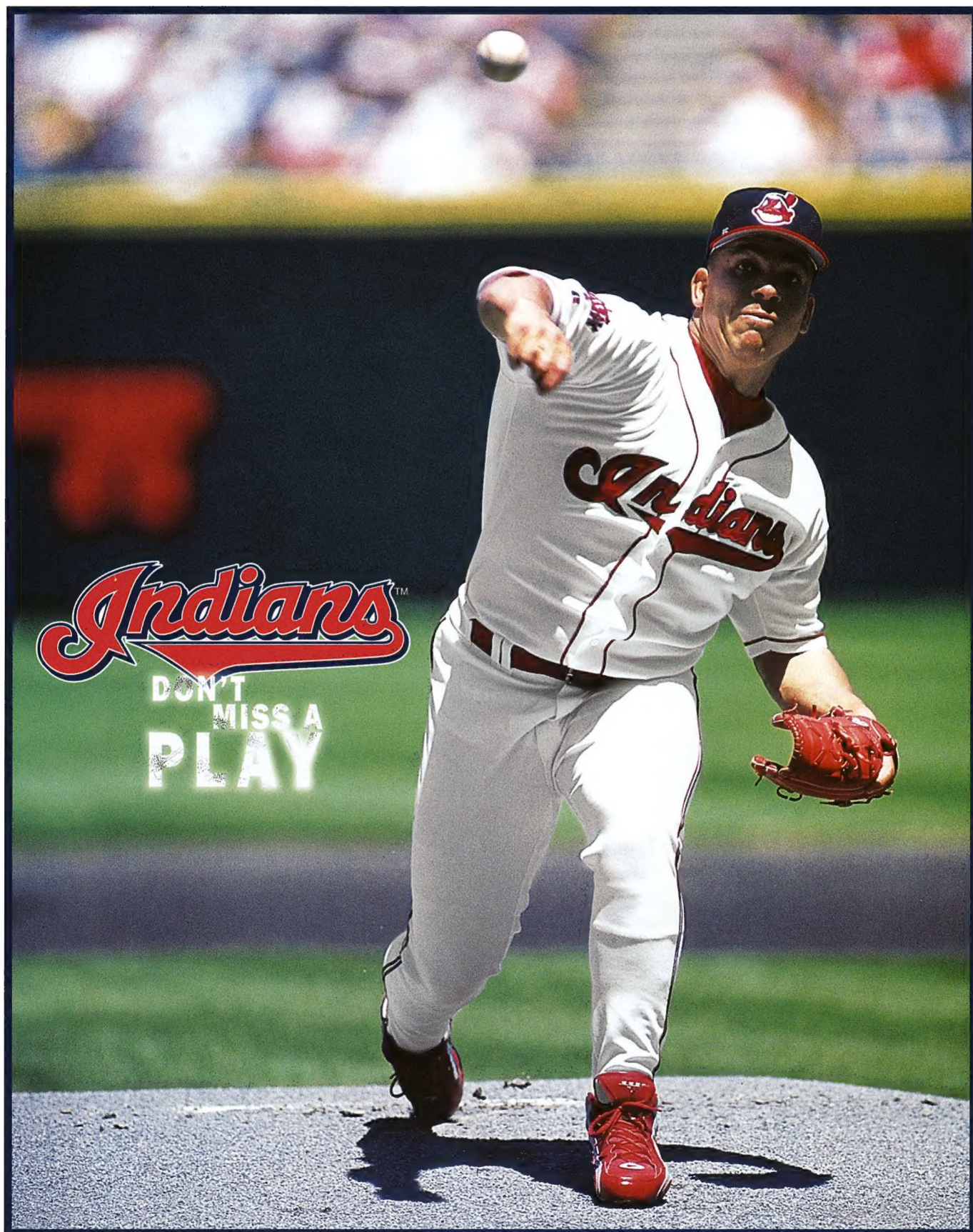


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